

# ALASKA MARINE HIGHWAY

## — 50<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY —

### **Jack V. Johnson, Legendary *Tustumena* Chief Mate**

A memorable chief mate, Jack V. “Square-rigger” Johnson (1927 - ), is an Alaskan original from Kodiak. As a man who had sailed the world’s oceans at a young age, he signed onboard the S/S *Exodus* as a crewmember at the foundation of the nation state of Israel. Jack was our hero, a tall, husky man, with handlebar moustache, stiffly waxed to sharp tips, eating a hearty breakfast every morning in the officer’s mess room telling wonderful sea stories, the kind of seaman we can never forget. Our chief mate was a salty figure, easy-going, friendly, helpful, and talkative with a calm voice, a cheerful aspect and a warm smile that swept through the crew.

Jack had sailed on many different kinds of ships to many different parts of the world from Wellington to Shanghai, Haifa, Nikiski, Kodiak and Dutch Harbor proving the old saying that “a gangway leads to any port in the world.” Jack had sailed on one of the last of the great sailing ships, the New Zealand-flagged, four-mast bark *Pamir*, between January and March 1946, on a voyage from Vancouver to Wellington, New Zealand. “Standing watch with Jack was awesome,” remembers former *Tustumena* shipmate, Jon Stetson of Juneau. “He knew a lot about everything. I asked him about his square-rigger days and he told yarns about life before the wind. I never doubted his stories.” Crewmembers of the *Tustumena* called him “Square-rigger Johnson.”

In his long maritime career, Jack had worked as a pile driver, a hardhat diver in Cook Inlet, and as a mail boat skipper of the M/V *Expansion* serving the Alaska Peninsula and Aleutian Islands from Seward in the 1960’s. Additionally, he had served as a marine consultant, sailed on the oil-platform supply vessel *Alaska Husky* in Cook Inlet, served as a chief mate on the *Tustumena*, and completed his lengthy career as a legendary ship pilot with the Southwest Alaska Pilot’s Association specializing



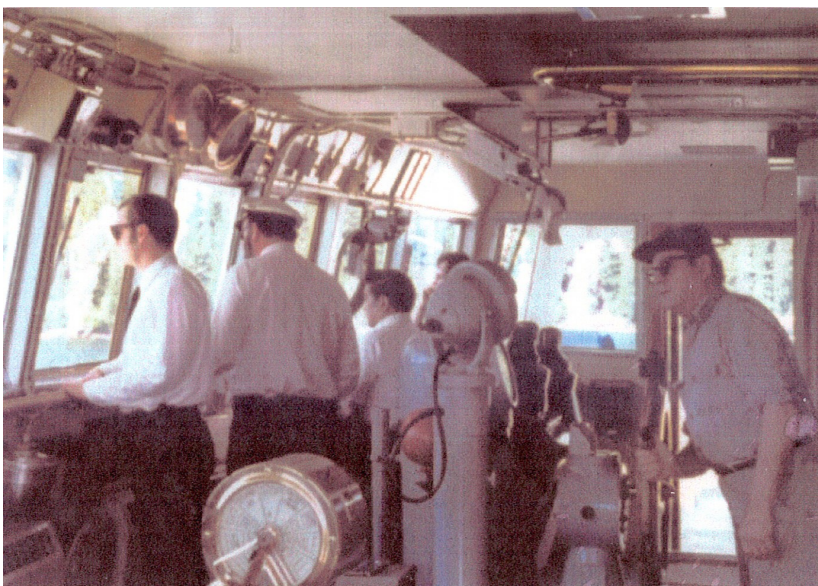
# ALASKA MARINE HIGHWAY

## — 50<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY —

in Alaska Peninsula, Aleutian Island, and Bering Sea ports.

As a marine pilot, “Jack did not like jobs on Japanese ships because they were built for 5-foot tall mariners and he’d bump his head a lot,” recalls John Stetson. “So he decided to con the next one from the man-walk just forward of the bridge, where there was no overhead, hollering commands through an open window. As the deck crew began setting up to unload, a cargo picking cable with a 50 lb steel ball on its end came at him out of nowhere and nailed Jack at center mass, breaking about every bone in his body. Certain those crewmembers had tried to kill him, he often ended a good tale with, ‘And that would have killed any mere mortal; they’re just lucky it was me!’ ”

As a chief mate, Jack would order, “Paint her from the truck (top of the mast) to the waterline lads,



Photograph by Phil Taylor.

as weather and time dictate.” Each year the *Tustumena* came away from its annual shipyard maintenance period in Seattle with a fresh coat of paint looking like a new ship on Jack’s watch.

“We pulled into Seward on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July weekend, the dock was packed with people and Jack was the mate on the stern,” remembers former

*Tustumena* shipmate, Jack Butler. “Bob Crowley and I had thrown our heaving lines ashore and once the longshoremen had secured the [mooring line] eyes on the bollards, Jack booms out, ‘Take her to steam, lads.’

“I saw my chance and boomed out in reply, ‘Aye, aye, Matie, she’s to steam



# ALASKA MARINE HIGHWAY

## — 50<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY —

and coming up hard and fast!

“Then Bob and I boomed together, ‘She’s all fast aft, Matie!’ Jack just shook his head and later said, ‘I knew I shouldn’t have said that with you two back there.’ We had many a laugh over that.”

As a great storyteller, Jack told tales of his adventure-filled life, and that he had known unusual Alaskans as Sea Otter Jones, the man who understood sea otters better than any one and discovered a small colony of Aleutian Canada geese, long thought to be extinct, surviving on volcanic Buildir Island. There were stories of Billy Nikiforov, “a strange type. Those who went out with him hunting and trapping on the Alaska Peninsula never came back.”<sup>1</sup>

Once invited as a guest to a wonderful dinner with Jack and his wife Iris (the Magistrate of Seward) at their First Avenue home with a large anchor in the front yard, Jack read Kipling’s poem, *Gunga Din* to its dramatic ending before we ate, pronouncing each word flawlessly in a rhythmic cadence while wearing a Scottish kilt and beret. As the meal started, Jack began barking military commands, all for the sake of live entertainment. It was a grand time and a wonderful evening with Jack and Iris.

His greatest and most enduring story was that of being a crewmember on the S/S *Exodus*, ex *President Warfield*, taking 4,415 European Jews to British Mandatory Palestine on July 11, 1947.

We *Tustumena* crewmembers at first thought it was “just another tale” until an article came out in the *Anchorage Daily News* in April 2007 (see accompanying articles) confirming the story. In 2007, Jack was recognized for his long-ago service as a national hero of Israel by Benjamin Netanyahu and in 2008 was bestowed Israeli citizenship.

Jack was equally legendary in Alaska. According to Jon Stetson, formerly of Seward, “Jack’s daily ritual was to don his survival suit at the water’s edge and go for a good long swim with his Newfies. Suited up he looked even





# ALASKA MARINE HIGHWAY

## — 50<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY —

bigger than the giant man he was, especially flanked by two massive dogs and the sight of the three of them making way in perfect formation into three-foot seas sometimes drew a crowd.”

Underway, a young third mate brought an AM/FM radio to the wheelhouse of the *Tustumena* to listen to music while on watch, Jack saying in shocked dismay, “I’ve never been shipmates with music on the bridge of a ship before.” Music in the wheelhouse came to a quick end. Undocking at Homer, Jack cocked his hat and barked rudder commands into the wheelhouse. Passengers lined the rail watching Jack. In sequence he barked to the helmsman, “Midship, hard left rudder, shift the helm.” Coming away from the dock smoothly, Jack strolled into the wheelhouse with a satisfied



Chief Mate Jack V. Johnson. Photograph by Jon Stetson.

smile saying, “I love this stuff. Those passengers think I am the captain.”

As the *Tustumena* expanded her service along the Alaska Peninsula to King Cove in 1979, we younger officers wondered where the information came about the old mail boat routes used by Captain Richard Hofstad. Charts in some areas were incomplete with large areas of water

remaining blank and un-surveyed. One of our charts was titled as a “Preliminary Chart” yet we navigated through these empty areas without incident using the old track lines employed by the predecessor mail boats.

We now know that knowledge of the old mail boat routes came primarily from Jack Johnson. “I laid out the old courses on the *Tustumena*’s charts to Cold Bay. I had made several trips with my uncle, Heinie Berger, on the old mail boat *Garland* between Seattle and the Aleutians,” said Jack. “We used to pull



# ALASKA MARINE HIGHWAY

## — 50<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY —

into Port Wrangell and drop a king crab pot. We ate well.”<sup>2</sup>

Familiar with the “Land of Smokey Seas,” at an early age, Jack was later sailing as the master of the mail boat, *M/V Expansion*, 148 feet long, built in Bellingham, Washington in 1944. She had previously been serving as a Pribilof Island tender for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service under the name *Dennis Winn*. During Jack’s tenure, the *Expansion*, ex *Dennis Winn*, operated as a mail boat out of Seward hauling mail, freight, food supplies with an onboard store that included ice cream, and a few vehicles stowed on deck along the Alaska Peninsula and Aleutian Islands beginning in 1961 until about 1966. The *Expansion* then became a fish tender and was renamed again as the *Temehani*. She sank near Bora Bora in 1982.<sup>3</sup>

Jack additionally credits Captain Andy D. Santos with having some knowledge of the mail boat routes as well. Captain Santos was a former oil tanker mate and had sailed many years on the well-



Jack V. Johnson is on the left with binoculars, as is Captain Andy Santos on the right. Going through Bainbridge Passage in Prince William Sound on the *Tustumena* c. 1982. Photograph by Captain Bill Hopkins.

known coastal tanker, the *Alaska Standard*, between Prince William Sound to the Aleutians. Santos joined the *Tustumena* in the late 1970’s serving as our captain opposite to Captain Hofstad until the middle 1980’s. According to Jack Johnson, Captain Santos helped establish the Westward

Run with Captain Hofstad for the Alaska Marine Highway System, both men “pushing hard” on the idea with the State of Alaska.



# ALASKA MARINE HIGHWAY

## — 50<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY —

Following the wake of the old mail boats, the Westward Run was established in 1979 to Chignik, Sand Point, and King Cove, though sometimes we went to Cold Bay without stopping to record a pilotage trip. The Alaska Marine Highway expanded further west in 1983 to include Cold Bay and Dutch Harbor as scheduled ports of call.

Captain Bob Crowley, a retired master of the *Tustumena*, remembers these exhilarating days. “The first time into Cold Bay is etched in my brain. Captain [Hofstad] docking, Black Jack [Jack Johnson]



Chief Mate Jack V. Johnson. Photograph by Jon Stetson.

on the stern [to position] the [loading] ramp, and the wind blowing a gale on the starboard quarter and the dark of night. Everyone [is] shouting and the wind sucking your voice out. I’m being told to take up on the quarter spring [line] which was tight as a piano wire. Get tied up with a ramp over the bull rail and something like a Dodge Valiant

that had to be pushed up the ramp. I can still picture it and the tension. I know we kept adding ports and going further west.”

Ten years later in 1993, the villages of Akutan and False Pass were included in the schedule. The Westward Run became the most exotic route the Alaska Marine Highway System has. Johnson, Santos, and Hofstad were the creative thinkers behind the idea.

I last saw Jack Johnson as he was piloting the large U.S. Coast Guard icebreaker *Healy* out of St. Paul Harbor, Kodiak, past St. Paul Reef to the





# ALASKA MARINE HIGHWAY

## — 50<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY —

pilot drop-off location, in September 2006. Arriving to Kodiak on the *Kennicott*, we slowed down and then followed the pilot boat, *Kodiak King*, back to St. Paul Harbor with the *Healy*'s pilot Jack Johnson safely onboard. The pilot boat arrived to the dock first, and we watched with admiration as Captain Jack Johnson, then eighty-years old, scramble up the dock ladder to his pickup truck and giving us an enthusiastic wave of the hand. Jack retired after the age of eighty in 2007.

It was a profound honor to have sailed with these remarkable maritime pioneers and visionaries. They were kind men, serious men at sea, and taught their skills and knowledge to us younger mates moving up through the ranks. Indeed, these great men were all unforgettable. “[Jack Johnson] is truly one of the greatest men I ever knew, I looked up to him like a real-life Super Hero, even when he took it upon himself to straighten me out,” remembers Jon Stetson with respectful fondness.

Written by Captain Bill Hopkins, AMHS Retired

---

<sup>1</sup> Telephone conversations with Jack Johnson, August 15, 2013

<sup>2</sup> Telephone conversations with Jack Johnson, September 12, 2013; Heinie Berger was a well-known vessel owner and operator, managing a fleet of small cargo vessels between Prince William Sound, Cook Inlet, and ports to the Aleutian Islands between 1927 – 1954.

<sup>3</sup> Re *M/V Expansion*: <http://www.mxak.org/community/expansion/expansion.html>



# ALASKA MARINE HIGHWAY

## — 50<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY —

### Alaska sailor lauded by Israelis for 1947 Exodus mission

ANCHORAGE (AP) — A young Alaskan named Jack Johnson sailed into history and an Israeli hero's stature in 1947, but never really realized it until he returned to the Mediterranean this winter at age 80.

Johnson, a Seward resident who in December retired from piloting ships around Alaska, had a dizzying youth during World War II and then found himself at the right bar in southern France to help Jews press their case for a homeland. While he was ashore in Marseille after ditching one sailing gig and pursuing a young lady, he said, the Zionist group trying to slip Jewish refugees past a British blockade into Palestine asked him to join their crew.

The Orthodox Russian Christian originally from Kodiak had witnessed the horrors of a Nazi concentration camp, he said last week, and he wanted to help Jews any way he could. He signed on to crew aboard the Exodus, a ship that attempted to move some 4,500 refugees and in so doing is widely credited with evoking the world's sympathy toward formation of Israel.

But the British, who governed Palestine at the time and responded to Arab fears about immigration, turned the refugees back while killing one crew member and two passengers. For all these years Johnson thought his mission was incomplete.

"I figured we failed," Johnson said after returning from a February tour of Israel that he bought at a fundraising auction to help establish a Jewish museum in Anchorage. "We didn't get them in there. I was there and the next thing I knew I was back in Marseilles looking for another ship."

The events inspired Leon Uris' novel "Exodus" and its Paul Newman-Eva Marie Saint film adaptation,



Rabbi Yosef Greenberg of Anchorage, left, and Jack Johnson of Seward, is shown on Monday in Anchorage. Johnson recently visited Israel 60 years after he crewed on the Haganah ship Exodus in 1947, which attempted to bring 4,500 Jewish refugees from Europe to British-controlled Palestine following World War II. Johnson was reunited with the ship's captain and both were featured in a photo in the Israeli newspaper Yediot Acharonot.

AP Photo/Anchorage Daily News, Erik Hill

though Johnson said the fictionalized refugee shipments in that story were only loosely based on the voyage he witnessed.

Johnson had been a young sailor involved in shipping arms to the Soviet Union during World War II when his ship was sunk and he was stuck in Archangel, Russia. While waiting to be repatriated, he said, he was inspired to join the Soviet army, in which he served during the liberation of Polish concentration camps. After the war he went back to crewing on freighters, which is how he found himself at Marseilles.

Home in Alaska in 1953, Johnson scarcely thought about the "Exodus"

events for decades, though he remained a supporter of Israel.

"Sailors are funny," he said. "You get off one ship and say, 'Maybe we'll see each other again,' but you never do."

Except, 60 years later, he chanced to see the captain with whom he had served for those 12 pivotal days. At the museum fundraiser he bid \$18,500 for a guided trip with Anchorage Rabbi Yosef Greenberg, and once they reached Israel they discovered the captain of the Exodus, now 84, still lived outside Haifa. What followed was a joyous reunion covered by the Israeli media, and a hearty round of thank-yous from Israeli parliamentarians and digni-

taries including former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

"I couldn't understand it at first," Johnson said. Then those who praised him told him they considered the Exodus ship a crucial point in securing United Nations support for Israel. The Holocaust survivors trying to reach Israel didn't make it immediately, but their plight reached the world.

The Israeli newspaper Yediot Acharonot reported the tearful meeting between Johnson and Exodus captain Ike Aharonovitch, though it said Aharonovitch at first didn't recognize his short-time second mate.

"The two sat together for hours," according to the Yediot Acharonot report. "Ike brought out his 'Exodus' album, and they recalled the difficult battle, how they were surprised by the British who attacked them suddenly in the open sea, how they threw potatoes and canned goods at the British and how they tossed the brazen British overboard."

"Ike chain-smoked. He looked excited, and his eyes were twinkling. Johnson's tears flowed."

Johnson said Thursday that he always had wanted to go back to Israel, and that his wife had never been there. His first request to Greenberg was to find the grave of his dead crewmate, beaten by the British boarding party during the riot. To his surprise, a tour guide said he knew Aharonovitch's daughter, and that the 84-year-old captain still lived.


Johnson's treatment in Israel has given him renewed appreciation for the events, he said.

"I'm still kind of amazed, looking back and realizing I was a part of it," Johnson said. "It gives you kind of a strange feeling and strange emotions."

For Rabbi Greenberg, Johnson turned into more than a museum

donor. He'll be the subject of an exhibit in the museum, for which organizers hope to break ground next spring. Photos from Johnson's return and information about the 1947 sailing will go into the exhibit.

"We thought it would be a wonderful trip to Israel," Greenberg said. "But what it turned into — the whole Exodus story — was just unbelievable. Something that was to support the museum becomes part of the museum."



## HEALING

Jim Shin Do Ac  
Cranio Sacral • Qi  
Gift Certificates  
2  
NEW LOCATION: 271

## KETCHIKAN DRILL

Annual Member  
ELECTION OF BOARD

# POSTPONE

Tuesday, April 10, 2012  
5:00 PM - 7:00 PM  
& Referees

Also any persons with ideas





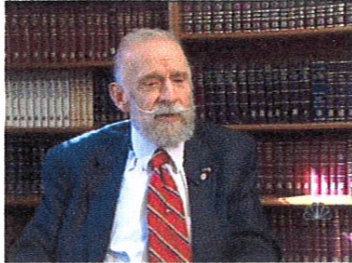
# ALASKA MARINE HIGHWAY

## — 50<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY —



inAlaska.com

### Alaskan remembered for helping Jewish refugees



Alaskan Jack Johnson helped Jewish refugees flee Europe. (Eric Sowl/KTUU-TV)

by John Tracy  
Monday, April 2, 2007

ANCHORAGE, Alaska -- Every young American knows the story of the Mayflower.

In Israel, however, children learn the story of the Exodus 1947 -- a ship of Jewish refugees looking for a place to live after World War II.

Leon Uris wrote a novel based on the ship, and Hollywood made a movie in 1960.

What you won't see or read in any of those accounts is the role played by a young Alaskan, a story that went untold for 60 years.

This is a story of two captains: Ike Aharonovitch, 24, a Jewish survivor of World War II, and Jack Johnson, 21, a merchant seaman from Kodiak who ended up in France after more than one ship had been torpedoed out from under him.

By 1947, the Holocaust had claimed the lives of more than 6 million European Jews; those who tried to return to their homes were often met with more violence.

Johnson was approached by members of the Jewish underground looking for men brave enough to run a British blockade and establish a new Jewish state in the British colony then known as Palestine.

"We talked awhile and I said, 'What do you have going right now?' And he said, 'We have the Exodus.' I said, 'Well, that's where the action is. I'd like to go on that one,'" Johnson said.

The Exodus, an old Chesapeake Bay steamer built to handle 300 people, was instead crammed with 4,500 men, women and children fleeing from persecution. Johnson said he was appalled by the conditions refugees had to endure; yet, he had witnessed the Holocaust first-hand and was compelled to help the European Jews.

"I'd witnessed during the war how horrible the Holocaust was," he said. "This is a chance to help the Jews. It's a good idea, you know? I guess you might say I was idealistic in a lot of ways."

Aharonovitch found himself in need of a skilled mate after his pilot jumped ship under threats from the British.

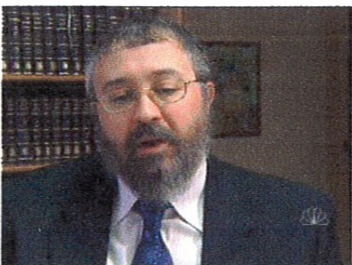
On July 11, the Exodus made a run for the shores of present-day Israel.



The Exodus was made to hold 300 people, but transported 4,500 Jews overseas. (Eric Sowl/KTUU-TV)



Jack Johnson made a trip to Israel and met the captain he made the journey with. (Eric Sowl/KTUU-TV)



Rabbi Greenberg said Jackson's actions were an unbelievable act of selfishness. (Eric Sowl/KTUU-TV)

# ALASKA MARINE HIGHWAY

## — 50<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY —



Children in Israel are told the story of Johnson's brave actions. (Eric Sowl/KTUU-TV)

"I didn't know it at the time, but the captain knew that British were out there waiting for us. So we left and sure enough, we were shadowed by six British destroyers," Johnson said.

The Exodus came within 40 miles from Palestine before the British moved in. They rammed the ship from both sides before boarding with rifles drawn.

"We weren't able to repel them, we did our best," Johnson said. We were completely unarmed. Everybody, the passenger and the crew were throwing tin cans and potatoes and anything else we could at the British.

"I was on the bridge there with my watch partner, Bill Mellman, and one of the British sailors shot him in the face. I was right there at the time and he went down and I got all upset. Anyway, I looked up and here's a gun right between my eyes and I said, 'Don't shoot.'"

The British escorted the Exodus into port at Haifa, where the refugees were forcibly removed. The onboard melee claimed the lives of two passengers and a crewman, Bill Bernstein.

Johnson convinced the British to allow a proper burial. The refugees were gathered up and placed in cages on three British prisoner transport ships and sent back to the very camps in Germany from which they had just been liberated.

But the plight of the Exodus galvanized world opinion. Within two months, the United Nations authorized creation of the state of Israel. Johnson returned to the life of a sailor.

He eventually returned home to Alaska, spending six years as chief mate and pilot on the Tustumena. Johnson has spent the last 28 years as a pilot, safely guiding ships in and out of Alaska's waters.

He retired at the end of last year and decided, at the age of 81, he wanted to see Israel and visit the grave of Bernstein, his fellow crewman who was killed on board the Exodus. He thought he might even find the grave of Captain Ahronovitch.

Johnson donated \$18,000 at a fundraiser for the Alaska Jewish Historical Museum and won a trip.

When he got to Israel, he could not find the grave of Capt. Ahronovitch; instead, he found the captain himself.

"He stood up when I came in the door looked at me and I said, 'Yea, you've changed a bit.' And he said, 'I don't know you.' He said, 'You've got a beard.' And I said, 'You're hair's all white.' And he says 'I dye it,'" Johnson said.

Ahronovitch didn't remember him at first, until Johnson reminded him of the young Alaskan who replaced his pilot.

"I said, 'When you logged me in I had my second mate's license.' He said, 'Oh, you were the second. Yeah.' Boy, he gave me a big hug and he said, 'Now I remember you.' He said, 'You've changed.' And I said, 'Yeah, you have too, captain,'" Johnson said.

The reunion made big news in Israel, where every child learns the story of the Exodus and now considers Capt. Jack Johnson a national hero.

Rabbi Yosef Greenberg of the Lubavitch Jewish Center of Alaska said Johnson's actions are laudable.



# ALASKA MARINE HIGHWAY

## — 50<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY —

"To me, it's an unbelievable act of dedication and selflessness. In Jewish tradition we have a term for it, which is called a very kind person - hacidamato," said Greenburg, adding "a very kind person of the nations of the world who really felt for the Jewish people."

This is a story of two captains, reunited 60 years after sailing together aboard a ship called the Exodus -- a little ship -- that launched a nation with the help of a young Alaskan.

Greenberg put it best when he said Johnson came to the Lubavitch Jewish Center fundraiser to raise money for the museum and will now be a part of it.

The timing of all of this is appropriate, with the Passover holiday beginning tonight at sundown.

Johnson is not Jewish. He was baptized into the Russian Orthodox faith in Kodiak.

Johnson said he was one of three Christians on board the Exodus.

He said when he witnessed the liberation of the Polish concentration camps after the war, he was eager to help refugees get to Palestine.

Johnson has invited Capt. Ahronovitch to go salmon fishing this summer on his daughter's boat in Seward.



All content © Copyright 2000 - 2007 WorldNow and KTUU. All Rights Reserved.  
For more information on this site, please read our [Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms of Service](#).

